

February 22, 2013

Testimony for Appropriations Committee  
In support of continued funding for

**The Children's Law Center of Connecticut, Inc.**

Submitted by: Justine Rakich-Kelly  
Executive Director

Good evening. My name is Justine Rakich-Kelly and I am the executive director of the Children's Law Center of CT, also known as CLC. I have been at this position for more than 12 years. In that time, I have testified before you numerous times, to provide our perspective on pending legislation and over the latter half of my tenure, to ask you to provide and now protect our funding.

Every year, when I come before you, I tell you a few stories of families and children that we've helped. I've painted a compelling picture of the good work that we do. Just this once, I'd like to take a different approach. I'd like to start by telling you what we do for you, the State of Connecticut.

First, for those of you who may not be familiar with the Children's Law Center, our mission is to protect the interest of indigent children in family Court and to advocate policies which advance their well-being and best interest. In plain language, we represent poor children whose parents are engaged in high conflict custody and visitation disputes. Our Legal Representation program began in Willimantic 20 years ago. We eventually moved to Hartford and have expanded to serve 8 Judicial Districts today. We expect the program to be statewide by 2017.

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The cases we take are complicated and are exacerbated by issues of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, drug and alcohol addiction, mental illness, cognitive limitations, DCF involvement, chronic police activity and numerous court dates. We take them to help the parents figure out a better way to resolve their conflicts and transition their families.

The reason, I believe, we received this funding in the first place is because you saw the value of our work – both for your constituents and for the State of Connecticut. And you were right to invest in us then. You will be right to sustain your investment in us moving forward. I assure you, the State of Connecticut gets an awful lot of value for a relatively small amount of funding. Currently, we receive \$150,000 annually in the state budget. This is a small amount as a portion of the budget of the State of Connecticut, but for CLC, this amount is only slightly higher than the cost of providing services in one jurisdiction.

In more than half of our cases, neither parent has an attorney, leaving The Children's Law Center as the only legal presence in the case. In addition to representing the children, we assist their parents as they try to navigate the court system. We work directly with the parents to help them create sustainable, child-focused agreements, thus unburdening the state courts of "revolving door" family court cases involving time-consuming litigation. Incorporating a mental health professional in our work allows us to identify the unique challenges confronting each family; challenges that may in some way limit the parenting ability of a parent. We put interventions in place to address those challenges. Our activities expedite the matter in court, and with

appropriate interventions during, and after, the court process, we often circumvent the need to return to court time and time again.

We work with the entire family – parents and children – to ensure that the children’s needs are optimally met, and parents have the tools they need to be great parents.

In our cases:

- 85% remain closed and do not return to court for further litigation.
- More than 75% percent of our cases end in agreement avoiding lengthy trials.
- 100% are identified as high conflict and include a significant risk to a child.
- 66% have past or ongoing DCF services with whom we work collaboratively.
- 99% of the time, our attorney’s recommendations are incorporated into the Court’s orders

In the jurisdictions we serve, we are often forced to close intake due to the high demand for our services, and are asked by the court to “take just one more” case. Our model is unique and effective and we have the support and respect of the courts we currently serve.

We are also honored to work with the Office of the Chief Public Defender to present trainings to other professionals who represent children, not only in Family Court, but also Child Protection and Probate Courts.

Finally, our Children’s Law Line, a toll free hotline service to answer questions about legal issues regarding children, receives referrals from the 211 system, DCF, and the Court System.

CLC's funding is administered by the DSS, through the Children's Trust Fund. We appreciate your recognition of the contributions we make to Connecticut, and ask that you continue to support us and restore funding to The Children's Law Center.

Thank you.